

Farewell phantasy

Keith Holland Gems

We were in the In & Out Club, renowned for its silence, and, of course, its rule of no shop-talk. 'Sorry Sir, no briefcases please. It's a tradition.' It was no good, we had to retire to the ladies common room on the second floor. My briefcase, in fact, contained a spare shunt valve for our ancient engine - a casting of much aesthetic beauty and part of the heart of the object of our affection.

Cuthbert and I sat bathed in mellow light as we bent over the green baize to compare notes, break the seal on the new seasons *Reeds* and pour over our Admiralty charts of the North Sea. This was half the fun - in fact, more than half. The drizzle and damp shiny London streets were forgotten and we were 'full and by' with a cool northerly in pale sunshine; sea area, German Bight, listening to our ancient boat creaking and groaning across the seas of our imagination.

We solved all but one of our problems and synchronised our diaries. The question was, who to crew? It was always the same! - where to find people who were silly enough to sign on and yet, had some experience? We agreed, the only hope was to search amongst the young - preferably women. We looked at each other and winked saltily.

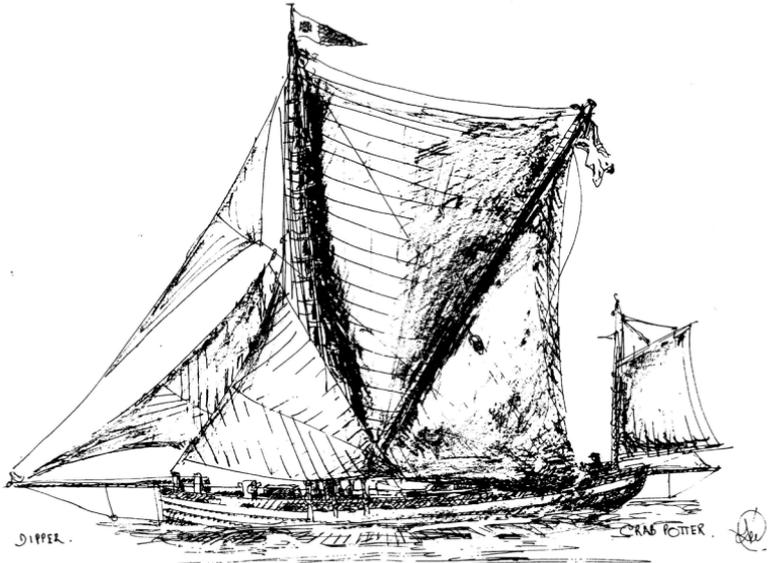
Cuthy and I joined *Dipper*, our East Coast Crab Potter, on Good Friday. Her 40 feet were extended to 51 feet by her bowsprit and boomkin. As far as I know, she is the last remaining example of this fine old work boat.

We had two days to dry her out and provision her before Charity (First Mate), and Lalla (Cadet Member), were due at the Old Town quay.

Dipper is so called because she buries her bowsprit and her ten inch freeboard ensures that her decks are permanently awash. As older members will know, there is no cockpit and the helmsman stands behind the wheel in a pair of *tabbercuddies*. These are limbered narrow rectangular boxes, two feet high, that hold the legs from being swept away in rough weather.

The flying jib topsail was modernised in 1926 with Wyckham Martin chain roller reefing; the mainsail brails quite easily, but the jib, foresail and topsail are stiff and unmanageable. The mizzen is of little use except as a steadying sail when lying to a seine net.

Easter Monday found us cranking-up the enormous flywheel of our single cylinder 'Telford Gem'. The initial firings are always atomic, but



Dipper (by the author)

this is eased when she is hot enough to swing the shunt-valve over from paraffin to crude. The escaping vapour mingles with Stockholm tar and old bilge water to make that elusive aroma that is *Dipper*.

We slipped south in a low sea-wrack on our shake-down leg. The wind was W4-5 and *Dipper's* massive displacement made stately progress, unruffled by the short chop of the estuary.

We left our main up with a brailing line to hand should our judgement or our engine fail when coming alongside. There is, of course, no gearbox so the engine must be cut some distance from the quay. It is, in fact, possible to go astern by engaging another cam, then cranking the engine in reverse and letting go the compressor, but this can give 2 or 3 nerve-racking minutes whilst 20 tons of boat hiss in deafening silence towards an immovable object.

Charity, her long silhouette black against the grey, took our lines. Lalla had missed her train at Euston. She arrived three hours later looking cheerful and unapologetic with her bright red hair, pink jump-suit and Persian slippers.

We had six hours before the tide served, so we anchored in the Wallet, by the Isle of Shepey, and slept before slipping through the Swatch at Midnight. Soon we were threading through Long Naze Reekes where Crab Potters once plied their trade, and then to the open sea.

The clouds had gone, stars peppered the velvet sky and the oil navigation lights stared myopically ahead. It was SW4, full sail and we rushed and

gurgled toward Oops Hagen. Weather helm had always been a problem with *Dipper*, but the hammer-headed spokes were well designed to take the strop of the three-fold take-alls on the well-placed athwartships kingposts.

The only electronic device, apart from our quartz watches, was the 1963 echosounder. The black of the cathode-ray tube was marked with a line graduated from 1 to 3 fathoms with a blob of mauve light which moved along it. Unfortunately, the blob was stuck at half a fathom, so we untangled the lead line.

It takes several days for the decks to really tighten up, so damp bunks and soggy cornflakes had to be laughed off. There was a moment when Cuthy thought Lalla had been stabbed, but it was her jump-suit - the dye was not fast!

The heads outlet pump had jammed and the drop-valve on the old single-lift bilge pump had ruptured. A blocked strumbox had caused a pressure build-up too great for the old lead arteries. Thank Goodness for a bucket that can't go wrong! It served a third purpose when the ebb against the freshening South West wind kicked up a steep beam sea. The internal pig iron ballast sets up a roll which combines with the pitch to produce an unbelievable motion.

A pale dawn found us shivering. There was no escape. Below, it was not windy, but much damper. The drip-feed wickless paraffin heating stove kept going out until unburned fuel caught fire and we briefly became too hot. The powder extinguisher was ineffective, but we had a CO₂ gas one which put out the fire. The day was saved by the double-gimballed primus. It roared comfortingly, making the flat toastmaker glow. The saloon had the atmosphere of a mushroom soup factory. The excess water vapour is deposited in the fo'c'stle to excite the ancient spores that waited for such an occasion.

We buoy-hopped to the invisible coast and let go the 801b fisherman. It was dark now, so we brewed-up and broke a bottle. Steaming gently, we talked, pleased with our achievement. I was tired . . . happy and, as our clothes dried . . . voices blurred into a homely hum, my eyes wandered to the massive long-handled axe... still in its original leather thongs, resting athwart the mainbeam. No wire-cutters here! . . . A few mighty swings could sever the deadeyes clear of their hempen restraint . . . or equally, repel zealous salvage men in time of peril . . .

That was the last I remember before drifting off.

Next morning, in the leaden silvery light, our tanned and oiled canvas hung drying like bats wings above the mirror surface. We had arrived! We knew we were famous - an artist with his easel was sitting on the chunky quay re-establishing us in the 19th Century.